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Lappela, Anni Irmeli

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# THE DIALOGIC NATURE OF DYSTOPIA IN ALISA GANIEVA'S NOVEL *THE MOUNTAIN AND THE WALL*

Anni Lappela (University of Helsinki)

## Abstract

*In this article I discuss and analyze the dystopian and utopian discourses in Alisa Ganieva's novel *The Mountain and the Wall* (Prazdničnaya gora, 2012; English translation 2015). My particular interest lies in the connection between geographical imagination and postcolonial themes, as well as the relationship between gender and space. The chosen approach to Ganieva's novel leaves out many other interesting topics, such as the role of Islam in the story, and questions about national and ethnical identity, but I will only elaborate upon them whenever they appear relevant to the outlined approach. My aim is not to label Ganieva's work as a postcolonial novel, but to discuss the possibility to read it from a postcolonial point of view and to read a postcolonial thematic in it, among many other interesting themes.*

## Keywords

*Caucasus; Dagestan; dystopia; utopia; postcolonial studies; post-Soviet space; Alisa Ganieva*

## Alisa Ganieva and her works

Ganieva was born in Moscow in 1985. Shortly after her birth Ganieva's family moved to Dagestan, where she grew up. She later graduated from a high school in Makhachkala, moved to Moscow to study literary criticism at the Gorky Literature Institute in 2002 and, as of today, still resides in Moscow.

Ganieva has published three novels, a number of stories, and a collection of literary criticism. She was awarded the Debut Literary Prize for her first novel *Salam tebe, Dalgat!* (Greetings to you, Dalgat, 2010). An interesting detail is that Ganieva submitted her novel to the competition under a male pseudonym, Gulla Khirachev, and revealed her true identity only at the award ceremony. Ganieva has later explained that, as a literary critic, she had long waited for a new author to appear in the Caucasus, someone who would write about the social and religious processes that have been going on there. As this kind of author had not appear, she imagined him, named him Gulla Khirachev, and then wrote her debut work under that pseudonym.<sup>1</sup> After her debut, Ganieva has published two other novels: *Prazdničnaya gora* (2012, literally "The Festive Mountain", translated into English as *The Mountain and the Wall*, 2015) and *Ženikh i nevesta* (2015, "Groom and bride", not yet translated into English). All her novels are set in Dagestan, partly in the city of Makhachkala and partly in the countryside.

In this article, I analyze the dystopian discourse of *The Mountain and the Wall* (subsequently referred to as *MW*), focusing on its dialogic nature. I use the term *dialogic*

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<sup>1</sup> See Alisa Ganieva's interview in *Vestnik Kavkaza*, 24.04.2013: Алиса Ганиева: «Истинная красота Кавказа в нашем многообразии». <http://vestikavkaza.ru/interview/Alisa-Ganieva-Istinnaya-krasota-Kavkaza-v-nashem-mnogoobrazii.html> (retrieved 16.03.2017)

in a Bakhtinian sense (when he writes about Dostoevsky), referring not only to dialogues between various characters and their worldviews but also to dialogic relationships that exist among all the elements of the novelistic structure (see Bakhtin 1963: 56). In Ganieva's novel, I focus on the dialogic relationships between dystopian and utopian discourses manifesting themselves at different textual levels.

However, in my interpretation, the use of Bakhtin's concepts of dialogue and polyphony for Ganieva's novel can only have a limited application. Firstly, Bakhtin argues that dialogue in Dostoevsky occurs between two divided voices, not two integral monologic voices (Bakhtin 1963: 344). In Ganieva's novel, most of the different voices are rather monologic. Secondly, in her text, people do not necessarily enter into contact and begin to talk with one another, as Dostoevsky's characters always do (according to Bakhtin 1963: 239). Thirdly, while in Bakhtin's polyphony there is a plurality of independent, unmerged and fully valid voices and consciousnesses (Bakhtin 1963: 7), we can argue that not all the characters' voices are equally fully valid in Ganieva's novel, even though many of them are. With these reservations, I will nevertheless examine Ganieva's novel as a dialogic and polyphonic work.

Examining the dystopian elements of Ganieva's novel, I want to find out if there is a post-colonial point of view and emphasis in Ganieva's novel, and if so, how to conceptualize the relationship between the dystopian and the post-colonial discourses of the novel. In addition, one of my aims is to place Ganieva's work on the map of contemporary Russian prose, and, more specifically, in the canon of Russian dystopian writing. In one of my previous articles (Lappela 2016), I discussed space in Ganieva's works and argued that the space of the mountainside and the city space form an antithesis on different textual and thematic levels of the text. This analysis has shown that mountains have a central role in the utopian discourse of the novel, while the city is central to the dystopian discourse. This spatial opposition forms the basis for my analysis in this article, too.

*MW*'s plot revolves around a dystopian vision of the political situation in which Dagestan is separated from Russia. Russia builds a large wall on the border of Dagestan and this arouses both fear and new hope among the Dagestani people. There are those who do not want to be separated from Russia, and those who think that now, finally, the Dagestanis have a chance to be in charge of their own country. The protagonist, a young journalist named Shamil, follows the events in the city of Makhachkala. The situation is not easy because there are more than 30 different ethnicities living in Dagestan. According to the Russian State Bureau for Statistics (Pocstat), in 2015 the population of Dagestan consisted of nearly three million people. There were over 30 different ethnic groups there, with more than 30 languages spoken. The largest ethnic groups as of 2010 were Avars (29%), Dargins (17%), Kumyks (15%), Lezgians (13%) and Laks (6%). Ethnic Russians form about 3.6% of the population, and the 13 largest ethnic groups have their representatives in the republican parliament. Over 80% of Dagestanis are Sunni Muslims.

Ganieva depicts the chaos that the different ethnic groups create when they all wish to have a leading role in the politics of the new independent Dagestan. In addition to these groups, there is also a radical religious group of people who, instead of wishing to establish an independent Republic of Dagestan, want to form a religious state called the Caucasian Emirates. This vision by the radicals is realized at the end of the novel.

### The postcolonial discourse in Ganieva's novel

Analyzing Ganieva, or texts by any other contemporary author who writes about the Russian Caucasus, means speaking in terms of postcolonial studies about the territories, which have been part of the Russian Empire, colonized under the Soviet rule, and are now parts of the Russian Federation. The terms “colonialism” and “post-colonialism” appear perhaps more complicated when discussing Russian colonialism than in the case of, say, Western European colonialism. The colony and the periphery are two closely interrelated concepts in the discussion of the Russian Empire's colonialism. The Russian Empire's colonized peripheries were not separated by land or accessible only by sea, as were the colonies of Western European empires. Edith Clowes, among many others, has noted that because the Russian Empire was a contiguous territory, the periphery could be very close to the center, like rural provinces, or it could be very far away, as distant borderlands (Clowes 2011: 9). In addition, we should also keep in mind the difference between the closely related concepts of “colonialism” and “imperialism” when analyzing Russian prose from a postcolonial perspective.<sup>2</sup> Postcolonial can be understood here as “the multiple political, economic, cultural and philosophical responses to colonialism” (Hiddleston 2009: 1). *MW* can be regarded postcolonial because of its attempt to find an imaginary alternative to Dagestan's colonial past and present.

One of the main concepts in my analysis is “imagined geography” which has been used in postcolonial and spatial literary studies in various ways. The postcolonial theorist Edward Said used the term to describe “the fictional quality of territorial descriptions of the “Orient”” (Clowes 2011: 4), and Edward Soja used the term “imagined space” when defining his concept of Thirdspace. Summarizing Soja's definition, Firstspace is a physical, referential, “real” space; Secondspace is an “imagined”, representational space; and Thirdspace is a combination of these two, “real-and-imagined” (Soja 1996: 6, 10-11). I will employ the concept “imagined geography” or “imagined space” in Soja's sense of the notion, as it has been used in many spatial literary analyses.

### Dystopian discourse in Ganieva's novel

There are many varying definitions for utopia, anti-utopia and dystopia in literary studies, but they still share many common features. The first time that the term “dystopia” was used was when it appeared in John Stuart Mill's parliamentary speech in 1868, when he was naming a perspective, opposite to that of utopia (Vieira 2011: 16). The prefix *dys* comes from the Greek *dus* meaning bad, abnormal, diseased (Vieira 2010: 16). In addition, the scholar Erika Gottlieb argues that the emergence of a totalitarian regime is a major component of the dystopian impulse (Gottlieb 2001: 6) and that the state is the main actor in dystopias. Gottlieb analyzes western and eastern dystopias written between 1920 and 1980, and states that in western dystopias society reflects the writer's fear of a possible development of a totalitarian dictatorship in their own (western) society (Gottlieb 2001: 7, 16), while authors of eastern dystopias – experienced in reality in the USSR and

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<sup>2</sup> On the difference between imperialism and colonialism, see Hiddleston (2011: 2): “If colonialism involves a concrete act of conquest, imperialism names a broader form of authority of dominance. Colonialism is in this way one active manifestation of imperial ideology, but imperialism can also be understood as a larger structure of economic or political hegemony that does not have to include the direct rule and conquest of another country.”

Eastern Europe – write about their actual past and/or present experiences in a totalitarian society (ibid.: 267).

In his PhD dissertation, Mattias Ågren explains why and how he uses the concept of “anti-utopia” when analyzing contemporary Russian anti-utopias. Firstly, he prefers “anti-utopia” over “dystopia” because it expresses better the dialogic character of the genre, “the dialogue between the anti-utopian fiction and a utopian narrative layer” (Ågren 2014: 6). Secondly, the idea of a bad place, embedded in the prefix ‘dys-’, makes the term “dystopia” less useful, according to his interpretation (ibid.: 6). In addition, it is useful to keep in mind that the term “anti-utopia” is employed more often than “dystopia” in Russian literary criticism. Originating from Greek, the word “utopia” literally means “a non-place”, or a non-existing place; and “eutopia” (which is pronounced in the same way) means “a good place” (Vieira 2010: 5). Both of these meanings of ‘utopia’ are omnipresent in Ganieva’s utopia, as I will show later.

Scholars Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan also see a clear distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia, yet they note that some critics conflate these concepts (Baccolini & Moylan 2003, 4). They state, citing L.T.Sargent’s ideas, that anti-utopian works are “directed against Utopia and utopian thought” and that “dystopia shares with eutopia the general vocation of utopianism” (ibid. 5). Baccolini and Moylan also share Sargent’s idea that dystopias “maintain a horizon of hope” (ibid.: 6) and that there remains a utopian impulse in the *critical dystopias* (ibid.: 7, the italics are mine). Critical dystopia is defined as a non-existing society, often located in time and space and intended to seem worse than the prevailing society, yet including the hopeful idea that dystopia can be overcome (ibid.: 7). In this regard I prefer to discuss Ganieva’s novel as a dystopia, rather than anti-utopia, yet I could also be one of those critics, mentioned by Baccolini and Moylan, who conflate the two concepts.

### Postcolonial dystopia

The Caucasian Emirate, described and discussed at the end of *MW*, is a religious dictatorship, tightly controlled by politicians and religious authorities. Thus, it is a typical dystopian vision of an authoritarian society. In the first two parts of the novel Ganieva describes how the republic of Dagestan ends up in a chaotic situation after Russia separates from it by building a wall on the Russian-Dagestani border. The last two parts of the novel describe the dystopia coming true. In the first part different ethnic groups, such as Kumyks, Nogais and Lezgis, insist on their right to be in power in the new independent republic. In the last parts of the novel, then, the Caucasian Emirate, subsequently referred to as the Emirate, has already established itself as a new state in Northern Caucasus, in the territory of Dagestan. The third part of the novel begins with the words “[c]haos set in” (*MW*, 181). It seems that the religious totalitarian system has either united all the different ethnicities under its rule or, alternatively, merely silenced them. Shamil, the protagonist, reads the Emirate’s tabloid: “A new independent state has come into being in the Islamic world. It has overthrown the Russian *tagut*<sup>3</sup>, who was

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<sup>3</sup> *Tagut* (Arabic), a general term from the Koran, denoting “mutineer”, “criminal” or “person, who transgress religious and moral boundaries”. Used in the present day to refer to any anti-Islamic person, group, party or authority that supports secular and material Western values. Definition from the vocabulary at the end of *MW*, p.254.

wallowing in vice. Guided only by the law of sharia, it will overcome the troubles of our time!” (*MW*, 231).

Ågren argues against Gottlieb’s view of the state being the main actor in (literary) utopias and anti-utopias, and says that her argument is not very valid when analyzing contemporary literature, even though he admits its relevance for the traditional view of the genre (Ågren 2014: 11). That is mainly because the location of global power “does not necessarily coincide with the state, nor are national governments the main agents of power” (Ågren 2014: 11). In this sense Ganieva’s text, in which the state is the main actor, seems to be a dystopia in a very “traditional” sense of defining the genre. The Dagestani authorities in *MW* have more power over society than any kind of global actors do.

Russian literary critics and bloggers have called Ganieva’s novel an “anti-utopia”, a “Dagestani anti-utopia”<sup>4</sup> and “anti-utopia after a Dagestani fashion” without, however, analyzing very clearly the anti-utopian elements of the text. Ganieva herself has said, when speaking about the popularity of dystopias in Russia, that “all the dystopias are dystopias only technically. In fact, they are all realistic.”<sup>5</sup> She has also stated that her novel is not about politics, but that political themes show up in her texts because “the life there [in Dagestan] is very politically intense, and there are lots of religious wrangles, and wrangles between different ethnic groups”.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Ganieva has explained that instead of being about politics, her novel is about “the destinies of people”,<sup>7</sup> and she thinks that one of the central discussions in the novel is the question of Caucasian peoples’ identity. According to Ganieva, her characters do not know “how to look at their motherland, how to identify themselves: are they Russian or Caucasian?”<sup>8</sup> Ganieva states that today’s young people in the Caucasus do not know their history but, at the same time, are very traditional and interested in their history, and that these two parallel processes interfere with each other.<sup>9</sup>

Gottlieb writes about two time-planes of dystopias (that of the stories’ protagonists, on the one hand, and that of the reader, on the other). According to her, the message of a dystopian satire is that “the protagonist’s present could become your future” (Gottlieb 2001: 15).<sup>10</sup> However, Ågren argues that almost every contemporary Russian dystopia is set in the near future. In a way these two views are, of course, two sides of the same coin and merely emphasize different aspects of dystopia. Gottlieb analyzes the role of time in

<sup>4</sup> See, among others, Maksim Artem’ev’s «Дагестанская антиутопия» in *Russkij žurnal*, 24.12.2012: <http://www.russ.ru/pole/Prazdnichnaya-gora-Alisy-Ganievoj> and Liza Novikova’s “Праздничная гора отделила Дагестан от России” in *Izvestija*, 13.02.2013 <http://izvestia.ru/news/544886> (last seen 23.03.2017)

<sup>5</sup> See Ganieva’s interview “Technical dystopias: Interview with Russian writer Alisa Ganieva” in *Little Village* of 24.06.2015: <http://littlevillagemag.com/technical-dystopias-an-interview-with-russian-author-alisa-ganieva/> (last seen 23.03.2017).

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> “Роман не о политике, не об отделении, а о судьбах людей.” <http://vestikavkaza.ru/interview/Alisa-Ganieva-Istinnaya-krasota-Kavkaza-v-nashem-mnogoobrazii.html> (last seen 16.03.2017)

<sup>8</sup> “(...) они не знают, (...) как посмотреть на собственную родину и как себя идентифицировать. Кто они – россияне, кавказцы?” <http://vestikavkaza.ru/interview/Alisa-Ganieva-Istinnaya-krasota-Kavkaza-v-nashem-mnogoobrazii.html> (last seen 16.03.2017)

<sup>9</sup> See Ganieva’s interview in *Vestnik Kavkaza*, 24.04.2013: <http://vestikavkaza.ru/interview/Alisa-Ganieva-Istinnaya-krasota-Kavkaza-v-nashem-mnogoobrazii.html> (last seen 16.03.2017)

<sup>10</sup> Gottlieb argues that the reader has to recognize the temporal distance between the protagonist and himself/herself: the protagonist “lives on a time-plane different from our own; [...] exists in our hypothetical future” (Gottlieb 2001: 15).

a political satire, and Ågren sees the temporal displacement as one of the key features of the dystopian fiction. Both of them see dystopia as something that could happen in the reader's future. Gottlieb also points out that it is important to read dystopias as political satires, because in them "the writer offers militant criticism of specific aberrations in our own, present social-political system by pointing out their potentially monstrous consequences in the future" (Gottlieb 2001: 13). According to her, then, dystopian satire has a socio-political message (ibid.: 15). The literary critic Aleksandr Chantsev analyzes Russian anti-utopias of the 2000s (the works published before Ganieva's novel) and according to him "the element of satire, inherent in dystopia, is present and even exaggerated in certain writers" (Chantsev 2009: 8). Reading Ganieva's novel as a political satire is a complex matter: *MW* clearly has a socio-political message but it does not depict present-day society in a particularly satirical way. The novel is a rather polyphonic work as a whole, as various kinds of ideologies and characters have a voice in the text.

The literary critic Kristina Rotkirch suggests that "the threats of the dystopias of the 2000s are quite similar to one another. They are related to the isolation of a country, to a war, and especially to a civil war, to the vulnerability of ethnic minorities and to the possibility of ethnic conflicts" (Rotkirch 2012: 153).<sup>11</sup> Rotkirch's argument is based on her analyses of works by such authors as Dmitry Bykov, Viktor Pelevin, Olga Slavnikova, Vladimir Sorokin and Tatyana Tolstaya, but this characterization serves surprisingly well also for the analysis of Ganieva's dystopia. Voices of religious, ethnic, traditionalistic and liberal movements in Dagestan are present in *MW*, and the debate between these different narratives forms the polyphony of the novel.

### Protagonists of Dystopia

Gottlieb writes about a protagonist's *trial* and about his/her *awakening* to the dystopic nature of the surrounding society (Gottlieb 2001: 10, 21, the italics are mine). Ågren also suggests that anti-utopian novels are focused on the individual's perceptions and psychological experiences (Ågren 2014: 34). Both scholars state that the novel's characters' experiences have a significant role in dystopias.

In *MW*, Shamil is not a typical dystopian protagonist. He seems to be a flâneur, an observer who walks in the city and tries to make sense of the political chaos. (In this sense, Shamil very much resembles Dalgat, the protagonist of Ganieva's debut novella, who also walks in the streets of Makhachkala and meets people of different backgrounds.) Shamil does not face any real trial in the new society. Neither he experiences an awakening to the dystopic reality. He seems rather suspicious about all political agendas and well aware of the dystopian element of the surrounding reality from the very beginning of the novel. Baccolini and Moylan observe that dystopian texts typically begin "in the terrible new world", whilst in eutopian narrative the protagonist has a guided journey through the new society (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003: 5). In this sense Ganieva's text uses elements from both types of narrative: Shamil appears to be at the center of the events from the very beginning of the novel, but at the same time he wanders through the city. However, his journey is not guided and it gives him a panorama perspective on the new society. Ågren proposes that "the traditional function of utopia as a holistic metanarrative has given way to a multitude of different metanarratives" (Ågren 2014:

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<sup>11</sup> Translation from Finnish by this paper's author.

146). Besides, he states that contemporary Russia “is subjected to a hybrid of different metanarratives” (ibid.: 129). Ågren explains how Russian society is marked by a metanarrative “debate” (Ågren 2014: 25), in which different discourses participate and clash. According to Ågren, this metanarrative “debate” is also reflected in the new wave of Russian anti-utopian novels (ibid.: 25). In my interpretation, the current society of Dagestan is presented by Ganieva as a specific debate between different political and religious views. These clashing views are observed mainly through Shamil’s focalization.

Shamil’s attitude to religion is more straightforward than his attitude towards political discussions. Already at the beginning of the novel he writes an article about religious extremism in Dagestan (realizing its importance), and this event proves to be significant for the novel as a whole. Religion and especially religious extremism are topics which Shamil repeatedly discusses and quarrels about with his friends and acquaintances. He gets angry when his friend Arip tries to suggest that maybe “we could have a new state, one that’ll care about truth, justice, and morality more than cash” (*MW*, 172). Shamil calls these visions “brainwashing” which “will go on as always, just in a different way” (*MW*, 172).

One of Shamil’s experiences, perhaps closest to an awakening, is also related to religion. When he learns that Madina, his previous fiancée, has had a secret religious wedding, he is surprised. Shamil, along with Madina’s parents, is worried that she is now connected to radical religious activists. It is hard for him to accept that Madina has changed her religious views as a consequence of what is going on in the surrounding society. Ganieva herself has said that “clericalization or a rollback into the past – that is what worries me. The penetration of religious rhetoric into Russian state policy at all levels”. In her opinion, “religion, having come to the power, is a direct and frightening threat to every free-thinking citizen”.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Ganieva sees that in today’s Dagestan the young generation is more conservative than their parents, which worries the parents’ generation, for they fear religious extremism.<sup>13</sup> This gap between generations is directly shown in Madina and her parents’ relationship and in their discussions of religious conservatism. However, my aim is not to argue that the protagonist’s worldview reflects directly Ganieva’s own opinions. Rather, the statement of Ganieva’s opinions merely shows that the theme of religious radicalism is important to the author. In *MW* religion is problematized only when it is related to power and extremism, or to the generation gap.

As Edith Clowes points out, for many Russian writers the Caucasus and its people have been an alien setting against which Russian characters discover and define themselves (Clowes 2011: 141). In his literary analysis of space, the geocritic Bertrand Westphal speaks about the One and the Other, arguing that the One has traditionally been a “Westerner” and the Other has been a “non-Westerner” (Westphal 2011: xii). Westphal states that in postcolonial studies there could be a “risk of establishing another centric point of view, the former Other becoming an ongoing One” (Westphal 2011: xii-xiii). In

<sup>12</sup>“клерикализация или откат в прошлое - вот, что меня тревожит. Проникновение религиозной риторики в российскую государственную политику всех уровней”, ”И, дорвавшись до власти, она, на мой взгляд, являет собой прямую и страшную угрозу каждому свободномыслящему гражданину.” See Alisa Ganieva’s miniblog of 14.03.2017: <http://www.bbc.com/russian/blogs-39262561> (last seen 17.03.2017)

<sup>13</sup> See Ganieva’s interview “Technical dystopias: Interview with Russian writer Alisa Ganieva” in *Little Village* of 24.06.2015: <http://littlevillagemag.com/technical-dystopias-an-interview-with-russian-author-alisa-ganieva/> (last seen 23.03.2017).



other words, Westphal discusses the possibility that the postcolonial discourse can simply reverse this One/Self – Other hierarchy. This discussion about the Self/Other provides an interesting approach to Ganieva's works. Two concepts related to this discussion, I argue, are the idea of *writing back* and the *stereotype*. Both are often employed in postcolonial studies (see, for example, Hiddleston 2009: 117; and Bhabha 1994: 66). Susan Layton forecasts in the conclusion of her book that the “decolonized people of the Caucasus will ‘write back’ to tsarist imperialism, through literature, as well as non-fiction” (Layton 1994: 293). In this article I want to show how Ganieva “writes back” and subverts colonial stereotypes with her novel. She mainly does it, naturally, through her protagonists: in *MW*, all the key characters are Caucasian.

Besides the aforementioned Madina, there is another important female character in the novel. Asya, Shamil's wife-to-be, is an independent, modern woman who proclaims that she does not need any husband (*MW*, 149). She plans an escape from the Emirate to Georgia or to Moscow but ends up in Rokhel-Meer, the Festive Mountain, and eventually marries Shamil. More than Shamil, it is Asya who feels that religious fundamentalism limits her space and possibilities in society: “I never know what to wear (...) I don't know how to smile”. (*MW*, 149). Through Asya's experiences it is emphatically illustrated how male and female citizens of the new Dagestani reality experience space differently. Asya is the one who, to an extent, awakes to the dystopian reality of their society, which limits her space more than the one they previously lived in. She plans to escape from this dystopian society well before Shamil; thus, in this regard, she is a more active character than the protagonist.

Asya loves to read. Through her focalization a history of Avar language is revealed, which reflects in a concrete way the colonial “over-writing”:<sup>14</sup> Avar had first been written in an Arabic-based script, then in Latin letters, and finally in the Cyrillic alphabet (*MW*, 56). The rulers have kept changing the writing system and told the Avar people to adapt to a new system over and over again. Thus those who have studied Avar in Cyrillic and Latin may not have access to Avar in Arabic. In my opinion, it is not accidental that Asya loves to read and Shamil also reads many different texts from the past: this is yet another evidence of literary colonial history playing a central (intertextual) role in Ganieva's book. The textual nature of both the historical space and the present are emphasized in the novel. Thus the protagonists “read back” history when reading Soviet texts, and such reading is one of the means for Ganieva to “write back”.

### Utopian Discourse

At the beginning of the novel, Shamil the protagonist recalls an episode he has experienced in the past with his friend Arip. The boys go hiking up on the mountains and end up in a village called “Rokhel-Meer”, or “The Festive Mountain”. There they meet an old man who invites the boys into his house. This man is the one who calls the village “Rokhel-Meer”. In the man's house the boys fall asleep and, the following morning, wake up on the mountainside, in the same place where they started their trip to the village: “When [Shamil] woke, he saw that he was lying on the buzzing, sunny mountainside, the same place where he and Arip had fallen asleep, just below the settlement. Had he dreamed it all?” (*MW*, 99), Shamil wonders. Recalling the episode later, Shamil gets a

<sup>14</sup> I use the term “overwriting” as Sara Upstone does, to refer to the way in which colonizers replace the initially ‘written’ (place) with a new representation (Upstone 2016: 6).

strong feeling about everything being only a strange dream (*MW*, 100). This episode about the village called Rokhel-Meer gets its explanation more than a hundred pages later, towards the end of the novel. Namely, Shamil reads a novel by the fictional author Makhmud Tagirov, which ends with a mysterious depiction of the Mountain of Celebrations: “Our souls end up the top of Rokhel-Meer, the Mountain of Celebrations. And there, on the Meer, will be place of purity, where is no poverty, no scarcity, no want. There will be a great village there with tanneries, armories, and stone workshop. Its dwellings are part of the very cliffs; there, benign white spirits will feast together with the people, and the celebration will never end.” (*MW*, 224.)

At the end of the novel Shamil and Asya escape from the city to celebrate their marriage in the Festive Mountain. Portrayed in this way, the mountain’s location is depicted as being somewhere “in-between”, both in temporal and in spatial terms. It is simultaneously located in the actual reality of the textual world and in the (utopian) dream world. The Festive Mountain is located in the past, in the present and in the future. It seems to be real-and-imagined, referential and non-referential at the same time, a very concrete “Thirdspace”.

As I have noted earlier, “utopia” literally means “a non-place”, or a non-existing place; and “eutopia” means “a good place”, or an existing place improved. The dream-like village is a non-existent place and, at the end of the novel, it is a safe place to escape to, making it seem utopian in both senses of the word. With this kind of ending Ganieva seems to highlight that dreams and reality cannot be distinguished from one another in her novel, and utopia and dystopia cannot be distinguished either.

For Makhmud Tagirov, Rokhel-Meer symbolizes paradise. Tagirov states that God exists and Rokhel-Meer is the place where all souls end up in. But in Shamil’s dreamlike experience in the village of Rokhel-Meer, there is no religious connotation to it. Rokhel-Meer seems to be a mere symbol of utopia (or of a better future at least), which is why it means different things for everybody. Everybody can imagine it in his/her own way. Ganieva suggests that the festive mountain symbolizes a residual Caucasian culture, which is disappearing.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in Ganieva’s text, utopia is not connected only to the future but also to the past.

Ågren argues that there are two recurrent features in contemporary Russian anti-utopias, “the repetition of history and the problem[at]izing of the territory” (Ågren 2014: 149). In my mind, this also reflects the way in which geographical metaphors are dominant in current Russian discussions of Russian identity, and how Russia’s geopolitical space is defined.<sup>16</sup> Analyzing Russian anti-utopian novels of the 2000s,<sup>17</sup> Ågren argues that all the novels exhibit temporal and spatial displacements (Ågren 2014: 121). All the novels are set in the near future, meaning that their temporal displacement has some common features. Ågren also proposes that the spatial displacement marks the anti-utopia boom of the 2000s to an even greater extent than the temporal displacement (Ågren 2014: 126). According to him, the space of the society, as described in the novels,

<sup>15</sup> See Ganieva’s interview of 09.01.2013: <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Daghestan/Alisa-Ganieva-if-the-Caucasus-separated-from-Russia-127531> (last seen 27.03.2017)

<sup>16</sup> For more discussion of the topic, see Clowes 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Ågren analyzes works by Vladimir Sorokin, Dmitry Bykov, Dmitry Glukhovsky, Olga Slavnikova, Andrei Rubanov, Anna Starobinets and Viktor Pelevin.

is not as fixed and limited as it used to be within the earlier tradition of anti-utopian writing (Ågren 2014: 126).

Seeing *problematizing the territory* and *spatial displacement* as key features of the new wave of anti-utopian texts means assigning a special role to spatiality, place, and territorial realms in literature. In Ganieva's realistic novel the present-day Dagestan is very referential and, in this sense, spatial displacement is a more complex question than it would seem to be in science fiction or fantasy texts. Dagestan is Russia's southernmost republic, located on the Caspian Sea, and it shares borders with Azerbaijan and Georgia. In Russia, its neighbors are the Republic of Chechnya, the Republic of Kalmykia and Stavropolsky krai. All these geographical realms are repeatedly mentioned in the novel. Asya would like to escape to Georgia when political chaos continues in Dagestan (*MW*, 164-165) and Lezgian activists discuss the problem of the Azerbaijani-Russian border, which separates Lezgians, resulting in that they now have to live on both sides (*MW*, 64). There are also dozens of other mentions of actual geographical locations in Ganieva's text and, in my opinion, some of these references are significant to plot development (as illustrated in Asya's case above), while some of them illustrate the complexity of the geopolitical space of Dagestan (like the Azerbaijani-Russian border).

### Repeating history

Renaming a city is a typical way of showing, who is in charge, and the Dagestani political leaders change the name of the city of Makhachkala to "Shamilkala" after gaining power there (*MW*, 215). Shamil is the name of a well-known religious and political leader, who lived in Dagestan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and this leader is mentioned already at the very beginning of the novel: young people are listening to a song which recounts the events of 1839 and the Russian-Caucasian war in which imam Shamil resisted the Russian army's attacks bravely (as stated in the song) (*MW*, 17). Not coincidentally then, also the protagonist of the novel is named after the famous leader. Indeed, renaming the city and portraying the young people's admiration for this historical figure illustrate the modern commemoration of Shamil in Dagestan, which has seen an increase in the 1990s (Layton 1994: 293) and which also occurs in Ganieva's fiction of the 2000s.

Accordingly, layers of the long history of Dagestan-Russia relations are represented at the beginning of the novel emphatically. After this initial reference to the 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialism and to the Russian-Caucasian war, there is also a reference to Soviet history. Shamil observes the 9<sup>th</sup> of May celebration in the mountain village of Kubachi, where he has come to write an article about local craftsmen. Villagers are celebrating the Russian version of the VE day in a traditional way (as still happens all over Russia and partly in post-Soviet countries), that is, with medals on jackets, with Russian and Soviet flags, "red flags from their museum", as described in the novel (*MW*, 35). One remarkable detail is that the village craftsmen were making arms earlier but have now started a "mass production of souvenirs" (*MW*, 41). Against the background of violent conflicts later in the novel, this detail seems to emphasize the role of mountains and the mountain village as something distant from the (violent) reality of Makhachkala.

According to my interpretation, renaming the city carries both dystopian and utopian aspects in it. In the Soviet Union, cities and streets were renamed after revolutionary and political leaders, just as it happens in fictional Dagestan in *MW*. As an act, renaming the city is a reflection of the utopian project to construct a new, utopian society, which, in

this case, is called the Caucasian Emirate. The leader who lends his name to the city is not a contemporary revolutionary but a historical figure from a past war between the Russian Empire and Caucasian republics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, in my interpretation, these mentions of Shamil (at the beginning and near to the end of the novel) are some of the clearest suggestions on how to read the novel's events as a repetition of local history. There is no war going on between Russia and the Caucasus in Ganieva's novel – as this scenario was reality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian Empire and more recently in the first and the second Chechen War in 1990s and 2000s – but there is a serious political conflict in *MW*, which drives the republic to a civil war. Ganieva does not refer to other geopolitical conflicts of present-day Russia, but she makes a reference to the threat of the so-called “hybrid war” with its cyber attacks: from the very beginning of the political chaos, internet connections stop working in Dagestan. In the novel, the protagonist also observes that he is unable to connect to the internet, which constantly prevents him from using his phone. Indeed, this lack of an internet connection is an even more dramatic way of separating Dagestan from the rest of the world than the concrete wall at the Dagestani-Russian border.

One important aspect of analyzing the repetition of history is the intertextual level of Ganieva's novel. In *MW* Shamil reads texts of which there are long quotations in the novel. The texts are a poem and a novel by the alleged Dagestani author Makhmud Tagirovich Tagirov and a socialist realist novel *Rye Does Not Grow on Stone*. However, all of these texts are Ganieva's stylistic pastiches and not quotations from an actual writer's texts. Ganieva deliberately parodies the style of socialist realism in *Rye Does Not Grow in Stone*. Marzhana, the protagonist in this fictional novel, is a girl from a mountain village, liberated (as the story shows) by the Soviet rule from subjection and old Caucasian traditions. In addition to Asya, Marzhana is another important female character in the novel. She does not want to marry a man who is chosen for her, she is an active supporter of communism and she believes that Soviet rule has emancipated women (*MW*, 77). The quotation from the fictional author's book ends with Marzhana thinking about her future thus: “not in the mountains, not in the old ways, is happiness to be found, but in the new and joyous morning of freedom” (*MW*, 84). Later in *MW*, Shamil reads the Emirate's tabloid in which religious leaders declare that “[a] new day is dawning” (*MW*, 232). These two similar kinds of promises about a new morning in *MW* are from (fictional) ideological texts (a socialist realistic novel and a political tabloid) and they both take part in the utopian discourse of different societies (the USSR and the Emirate).

Erika Gottlieb notes that if the official mainstream of literature became utopian literature in the Soviet Union, then those who held against it became anti-utopian or dystopian writers (Gottlieb 2001: 116). This simplifies the situation in Soviet literature in many ways, but considering socialist realism a utopian writing provides interesting functions to Ganieva's use of intertextuality in her novel: quotations from the Soviet novel do not only make visible the Soviet history and questions about gender equality during the Soviet rule but also emphasize the dialogue between the utopian and the dystopian discourses in *MW*. Thus, in my mind, “utopian” Soviet text in a contemporary “dystopian” novel underlines the interconnectedness of utopian and dystopian discourses. The Soviet utopia turned out to be not so utopian for many citizens, and this seems to be the reason why Ganieva parodies socialist realism. The stylistic pastiches/parodies of socialist

realism are the key aspects of political satire in *MW*. According to my reading, making a satire about the Soviet past occurs in Ganieva's text only on an intertextual level.

To his acquaintance Khabibula, Shamil explains the rumors about Russia's aim to build a wall on the Russian-Dagestani border. He does this by referring to the Berlin Wall: "They say we're being walled off from Russia. Border troops, you name it. Like the Berlin wall." (*MW*, 45.) This reference to European history is, of course, rather natural, since the Berlin Wall is the world's most famous political wall. But it also emphasizes the text's relation to the referential time-space. All the other references to history are oriented towards Soviet and Russian space, but this reference also makes European reality visible in the text. There is also a reference to the Soviet history of the 1980s, a long quotation from Makhmud Tagirov's diary from the year 1980. In his diary Tagirov writes about a situation in which he has said to a woman, whom he has met at a party, that he wants to "work for the greater good of communism" (*MW*, 142).

One interesting point is that at the end of the novel, when the Emirate is formed, Makhachkala's most prominent monument of Lenin is taken down (*MW*, 181). This, of course, is a reminder of what happened in many post-Soviet countries when they became independent in the 1990s and when statues of Lenin were removed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Ganieva's dystopia the same independence process takes place in present-day Dagestan, yet this happens over two decades later than in other post-Soviet republics and under totally different circumstances: in the novel Russia has separated from Dagestan, and the new state is a religious dictatorship, not a parliamentary democracy. In a way, this seems to be the worst version of a society one can get, the opposite of a democracy, formed after the collapse of the USSR. In this sense, Ganieva shows how the independence process can fail miserably.

To summarize, in *MW* it is possible to see a contiguous line of references to Russia's/USSR's geopolitical position and its role in the history of Dagestan. These references are numerous, and some of them are more straightforward than others: the reference to the Russian-Caucasian war in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, various references to the Soviet rule (mainly through the intertext), the reference to the Berlin Wall, the reference to the Russo-Azerbaijani border, and finally, the reference to the current (imaginary) border conflict between Russia and Dagestan. In this sense, an interesting moment in the novel occurs when Shamil (rather poetically) thinks about Dagestan's past, about "the mountains' majestic birth" and about the "endemic" people who had taken shelter in mountains' fold (*MW*, 94). In his thoughts on ancient Dagestan, the mountains dominate the landscape and Shamil dreams about a harmonic, symbiotic relationship between people and the mountains. In a way, this past Dagestan without rulers and people being ruled seems to be a utopian place. Indeed, it is possible to read these references to the later Russian-Dagestan history against that very background: on a textual level it is shown that the colonial periods under the rule of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union are "overwritten" again and again into this complex imaginary geographical space.

In this sense, another key element of dystopia in Ganieva's novel is "problematizing the territory", which Ågren defines as one of the key two themes in contemporary Russian dystopias. However, in Ganieva's novel this problematizing happens in a faraway borderland and the perspective onto the events comes from the periphery itself, not from the centre.

## Conclusion

Like in many Russian dystopias written in the 2000s, in Ganieva's novel (published in 2012), the repetition of history and the questions concerning territory are also some of the central themes. Ganieva problematizes these dystopian themes partly from a postcolonial point of view. Indeed, when comparing Ganieva's novel to other works of dystopian fiction, it seems to differ from them in that here the main landscape is the border territory, traditionally seen in Russian literature as peripheral and the Other, often through exoticising.

The postcolonial perspective of the novel is constructed mainly by recourse to intertextuality and female characters, Marzhana (in the Soviet intertext) and Asya. They both resist the current society (in Marzhana's case, the traditional way of life in the mountains, and in Asya's, the new dystopian order). Marzhana's life under the Soviet rule can be read as a negative of Asya's life under the new, authoritarian Dagestani rule. The crucial difference between their stories lies in their opposite attitudes towards the new rulers: Marzhana experiences the new rule as a liberation, while Asya sees it as a threat to her liberty. In her postcolonial discourse, Ganieva brings the borderland to the centre and shows how the periods under the Russian/Soviet rule have impacted the multinational Dagestani reality through the centuries.

In the novel, there are previously analyzed quotations from a variety of texts: stylistic parodies of Soviet socialist realism, a parodic romantic poem, a quotation from a 1980s' diary, a romantic national song, and a tabloid text from the Emirate. Firstly, including these texts from different historical periods Ganieva, according to my reading, makes visible the multilayered nature of time in her novel. Secondly, making visible these different layers of time, Ganieva also shows, from a postcolonial point of view, how the Dagestani cultures have been overwritten time after time by Russian rulers. It then becomes clear, as literary critic Vasily Kostyrko has observed, that "both the Soviet and the Islamic version of modernization seem to be equally dangerous for the culture of endemic peoples of Dagestan".<sup>18</sup> Ganieva's novel offers a dystopian vision of the independence of Dagestan and leaves open the question of what could be a model for its better future. In her text, the dystopian and utopian discourses are in a dialogic relationship: the intertexts contribute to the utopian and dystopian discourses, and in the imaginary space of the text the utopian and the dystopian spaces intersect, as there is movement from one to another throughout the novel.

Another important observation is that Shamil the protagonist is not a typical dystopian hero, since he observes the events of his country without trying to resist them, and escaping from the dystopian reality only at the end of the novel. If we agree with Ågren (2014: 35) that realizing how the protagonist develops in anti-utopian writing is one of the key elements in understanding the metamorphoses of the genre, then Shamil seems to renew the genre of dystopia only a little: he is more of an observer than an active hero. In my mind, the protagonist as an observer reflects the possibility of reading the novel as a

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<sup>18</sup> «И советский и исламистский вариант модернизации одинаково опасны для культуры дагестанских народов-эндемиков» (Vasily Kostyrko, «Dzhigit i peri v tumane», 24.12.2012: <http://www.russ.ru/pole/Prazdnichnaya-gora-Alisy-Ganievoj> (last seen 17.03.2017)). The word 'endemic' refers directly to *MW* in which Dagestani people are depicted as "endemic, like the flora that surrounded them" (*MW*, 94).

polyvocal dystopia, in which many different voices propose their own utopian concepts of an ideal society but fail to realize it.

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